

ARC frustrations remain at Sauble

Solutions don't seem to be getting through, says school community council chair

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By Rob Gowan

The Amabel-Sauble school community council co-chair working to keep the school open left the latest accommodation review committee meeting feeling like the solutions they are coming up with are falling on deaf ears.

Terry Arnold said that at the latest meeting of the joint accommodation review process for Amabel-Sauble and Hepworth schools on Monday night, it was explained to the ARC that the Town of South Bruce Peninsula and the daycare had committed money toward the operating deficit of the school.

Arnold said Bluewater District School Board officials then did a presentation detailing all the capital renewal costs facing the school in the near future.

"It was a disappointing night overall for us," Arnold said Tuesday. "It almost seems like it doesn't matter what solutions we come up with ... it just seems like a done deal."

The board is performing a joint ARC on Amabel-Sauble and Hepworth with the recommendation of closure for AmabelSauble and status quo at Hepworth.

According to the student accommodation report on Amabel-Sauble school, capital renewal costs there are projected at more than \$1.3 million in the next five years.

Arnold said the community is searching for ways to generate more money to pay to operate the school. Arnold said through his involvement in minor soccer, which uses the fields at the school, he is looking at ways to save money and in turn provide more for the school. He also suggested rates for renting the school's facilities such as the gymnasium could be increased.

"No one seems to be wanting to listen to that. It's all about where the big money is coming from," said Arnold. "It gets more and more frustrating as it goes along."

Amabel-Sauble school was built 18 years ago as a partnership between the school board, the municipality and the daycare that operates in the school. But because of the partnership, the school was built bigger than necessary and is currently 147% larger than provincial grant funding supports, resulting in an annual operating deficit of about \$100,000. The school is about 40,000 square feet, while the ministry funding formula pegs the appropriate size of a school with 250 students at 26,000 sq. ft. At its meeting on Dec. 4, South Bruce Peninsula council gave pre-budget approval to contribute an additional \$51,000 toward the operating costs of the school to better reflect the amount of space the municipality uses. The daycare that uses the school has also agreed to pay more.

Arnold said the process is continually focussing on the costs associated with the school and little focus is being put on the families and students who will be affected should the school close.

Despite school trustees and board officials saying numerous times that no decision on the school's future has been made, Arnold is not at all convinced that minds are not made up.

Bruce Peninsula trustee Terry Bell, who is on the ARC committee, said he wouldn't be a part of

the process if a decision had already been made.

"Why would they have ARC reviews if there aren't any options, if it is just, 'well, we are going to go ahead and close the school,' "Bell said Tuesday. "Why would you give an opportunity for public input? It is just a waste of time."

Bell said learning about the capital work that needs to be done at the school was a bit of a surprise to him, because he had always been focusing on the operating costs as the main issue. Bell said the board has to provide all the information to the ARC during the review.

Still he feels the community is doing well in its attempts to find the money necessary to reduce the operational deficit and ultimately keep the school open.

"I think there is an opportunity for some more progress to be made and with all the steps they are taking, I wouldn't throw the towel in, that's for sure," said Bell. "They are exhibiting a real spirit of community and I think exhibiting a real need for the school to exist."

Bell said while he understands the frustrations of some in the community, his approach is to remain positive and to look at what has been accomplished so far.

"There is enough evidence, at least at this moment in time, that the community wants it, the municipality wants it, the daycare wants it, so let's work on finding the rest of the funding," said Bell.

The fourth and final ARC meeting for the Amabel-Sauble and Hepworth review is scheduled for Jan. 21 at 7 p.m. at Hepworth School.